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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons for implementing a course in parenting education in the schools. Among them are: (1) In the past decade, premarital sex among teenage girls has risen from 30 to 50 percent; (2) One child of every five is born to teenage parents and 94 percent of these teenagers keep their babies; and (3) 90 percent of teenage mothers drop out of high school and nearly half never finish the eighth grade. In a recent survey of the status of parenting education, 29 states reported offering parenting education. Programs in parenting should deal with vocational and family life education, supportive family relationships, emotional needs, health and family planning, and the availability of social services and crises counseling. It is suggested that: (1) Colleges of education become more aware of problems facing a changing society and implement appropriate courses; (2) State boards of education, in conjunction with parent and teacher committees, develop Parenting Education curricula; (3) State boards of education establish minimum standards for teachers of parenting education classes; and (4) Public schools cooperate with other state agencies in dealing with parenting. (JMK)

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Parenting Education Classes: Promise and Paradox

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Abstract

Parenting Education Classes: Promise and Paradox

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It might be difficult, indeed, to convince school boards and administrators to add another class to the public school curriculum. It is the premise of this paper that in the face of all obstacles, such a class in parenting education is not only desirable but obligatory for the welfare of society.

The reasons for implementing such a course, such as premarital sex, teenage pregnancies, medical risks to teenagers from becoming parents too soon, welfare dependence and child abuse, are documented in detail.

The goals and objectives for parenting education classes are defined, as well as methods of implementation. Recommendations are made in the light of the urgency of the problem of the lack of education currently in the entire area of parenting preparation.

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Parenting Education Classes: Promise and Paradox

In the present educational climate with critics clamoring for a back to basics curriculum and the public's unwillingness in many instances to fund higher taxes for education, it may seem an inopportune time to propose an additional course for the public school curriculum. Administrators and school board members, faced with the dilemma of finding time in the school day to include mandated courses, are also placed in the position of satisfying the public's demands for tougher educational standards and more evaluations and advanced courses. Nevertheless, in the face of those seemingly unsurmountable odds, there appears to be overwhelming evidence of the need for a course in parenting to be added to the public school curriculum. It is a fact that perhaps the majority of graduates may never utilize some of the learning acquired in school, but it also is a fact that most graduates eventually will become parents with absolutely no previous training in probably their most important work.

Within the scope of this paper we will discuss, therefore, the reasons for implementing such a course in parenting along with practical procedures for putting it in place in the curriculum.

In the past decade, according to a recent bulletin from SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the U. S.), premarital sex among teenage girls has risen from 30% to 50% in America's cities. As a result of this increased sexual activity, each year 1.2 million teenagers face pregnancy, account for 46% of out-of-wedlock births, and have 31% of all abortions. Sexual activity by teenagers increased by two-thirds during the 1970's. Twelve million teenagers were sexually active. Eighteen percent of boys and six percent of girls aged 13-14 and nearly half of 15-17-year-old males and one-third of females have had sexual experiences.

One-fifth of teenage pregnancies occur in the first month of sexual activity and one-half of the pregnancies occur in the first six months of activity (Zeyen, 1981). Of these teenagers, 600,000 will carry their pregnancy to term. At the present time one child out of five is born to teen parents and the overwhelming majority, 94%, keep their babies. Young teenage mothers have 50% more births than those who begin parenthood later, and their children are more likely to become teen parents themselves. Only 56% of teen parents eventually married. Thus, not only were these parents teenagers, but they were also compounding problems for themselves (Illinois Commission on Children, 1983).

Research has shown that 90% of teenage mothers drop out of high school

and nearly half never finish the eighth grade (CIECUS). Joblessness, welfare, dependency and want are unfortunate results of this situation. Also, an unstable marriage relationship and serious financial problems are likely to result.

Physiological risks or medical risks occur in teenage mothers before their own growth has been completed. Poor eating habits generally result in nutritional deficiencies. According to the Illinois Commission on Children Report (1983) health risks include: (a) greater likelihood of anemia: (b) higher incidence of toxemia, which in its most serious forms may result in high blood pressure, seizures, and sometimes death: and, (c) greater likelihood of prolonged labor which multiplies hazards to both mother and child. Also, these physiological risks are accompanied by psychological and emotional hazards. Thus, girls who become pregnant before 18 years of age fall into a very high risk group, educationally, medically, socially, and economically, if appropriate services are not available.

Bernard Braen, psychologist, reports: "The combination of repeat pregnancies, unstable family life, negative societal attitudes, and welfare dependency makes it easier to understand why nine percent of teenage mothers attempt suicide, seven times the national percentage for teenage girls without children."

Young fathers are unprepared emotionally and economically for new responsibilities. They bear enormous stress and anxiety and frequently abandon their infants. Ironically, in order to prove manliness to their

friends, many who run away from the responsibility of a family go on to father still more babies.

Infants, also, pay their price. More than a quarter million, or one of every 12 children, are born with physical and mental damage in the U. S. each year. Mothers, aged 15 and younger, are two times more likely to have babies with low birth weight than those aged 20-24 (Zeyen, 1981). Among all teenagers, infant health problems are about 39 percent higher. If mental and physical damage is not diagnosed and treated immediately after birth or during the first year of life, health and well-being may be affected in later years. Appropriate nutrition for expectant mothers, care in the use of medicines, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and protection from diseases, radiation, and harmful chemicals can greatly reduce numbers of birth defects in infants.

Another area of concern for children of teenage parents is child abuse. Neglect, emotional disturbance and learning problems appear when the children reach school age.

In child abuse the cause is not always poverty or psychological dysfunction of the parents, but rather their lack of knowledge and frustration. The National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse through telephone surveys of all 50 states found that 45 states were experiencing an increase in child abuse and more severe cases appeared in 33 states. Also, the fact that the amount of reported sexual abuse has increase dramatically was found to be the overwhelming experience. Every year 50,000 children die at the hands of their parents. By age 18 one

in four girls and one in 10 boys will have experienced some form of sexual abuse, mostly by parents, relatives, and friends of the family.

The interrupted schooling, joblessness, blighted marriages and blighted lives is estimated by some researchers to result in a tax bill of 4.7 billion a year in welfare payments alone. This is the price that citizens pay for denying our teenagers accurate unbiased information about sex and responsible parenthood.

The social ramifications of teenage pregnancies are many. The traditional family is changing. At present we are experiencing more single-parent families, more working mothers, and different family structuring. The nuclear family concept is disappearing. These changes are making for more stressful and problematical living for prospective teenage parents.

Eight out of 10 parents indicate that they want their children to know about human sexuality, the importance of responsible family relationships, and the extended risks that parenthood brings. There are no simple solutions. Family, peers, cultural, and religious backgrounds influence the behavior of these teenagers or prospective parents and aspects of the behavior will reflect these value systems. Except for family influence, the schools are most likely to reach young people and their families during the years when young people are establishing lifestyle habits.

To reduce teenage pregnancies, teenagers must be educated to the consequences of sexual activity. However, being informed is only one of the steps toward appriate behavior. Education must be followed by confidential, qualified counseling. Educators have a responsibility to find solutions

which will affect the complicated reasons for and the consequences of early sexual behavior that result in teenage pregnancies and births or for helping all young people develop healthful behavior and responsibility for their own health and that of their children.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Illinois Commission on Children's Parenting Education Committee developed a definition of parenting education which is representative of those found in many other state curriculum guides. It states:

> Parenting Education is the process of providing knowledge and skills--such as: communicating with others, nurturing, developing self-esteem: and understanding the physical, mental, emotional, social, economic, and psychological aspect of interpersonal relationships that would enable individuals to effectively assume roles and responsibilities.

In a recent survey of the status of Parenting Education in the United States, 29 states reported offering Parenting Education which is incorporated in Home Economics, Health Education, Social Science, Biological Science or specific Parenting Education courses. In three states Parenting Education is mandated and three other states offer Parenting Education to the parents of the students attending its school, a unique innovation designed to better parent/child relationships. In four states there is no statewide Parenting Education curriculum but the decision to offer the course is left to the discretion of the local school districts.

Eight states do not have a Parenting Education curriculum. California has evaluated their Parenting Education and found it to be successful and Michigan has an alternative school for pregnant students.

Puffert (1979) stressed that a program in parenting should deal with vocational and family life education, supportive family relationships, emotional needs, health and family planning and the availability of social services and crisis counseling. These topics generally were found to be the chief ones in curriculum guides.

IMPLEMENTATION

As identified in the summary of the status of parenting education in the various states, there emerged a variety of methods of implementation of education in parenting. One method is by mandate so that all public school students, from K-12 or some other arbitrarily set time span, would be trained in parenting skills. However, there seems to be universal acceptance that the curriculum should be developed by experts in the field and exhibit progression from getting along with others in the lower grades to the ultimate goal of seriously considering the implications of parenthood by the end of a high school career.

Parenting education may be taught in an interdisciplinary approach or through a separate course. At the present time, the first alternative is utilized more frequently.

Of prime importance in implementing Parenting Education, the preparation of the instructors needs to be thought out very carefully. Certification requirements should be explicit for high school teachers of family

life and elementary school teachers would need at the minimum at least one course in family life.

Each state needs to design a Parenting Education curriculum to insure that all the students, male and female, are trained in parenting skills as well as family roles, community responsibilities, decision making, parenting options and readiness, life goals, dangers of teenage pregnancies, birth defects, etc. (Johnson, 1981).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the magnitude of the problems facing our society in all areas of family life, the following recommendations are suggested.

1. Colleges of Education need to become aware of the problems facing a changing society and therefore implement courses to reflect these changes. An increased awareness among the future teachers about changing lifestyles exhibited in high school students today needs to be stressed also. Many problems of early parenting can be solved but only as people become aware of how education can help young people become informed of their options.

2. State Boards of Education, in conjunction with committees of parents and teachers, need to develop Parenting Education curricula. Numberous guides are in existence but they need to be studied, explained and then implemented.

3. State Boards of Education need to establish minimum standards for teachers of Parenting Education classes.

4. Public schools should cooperate with other state agencies dealing with parenting, such as Public Health, Child Abuse, Public Aid, Children and Family Services, Mental Health, and Drug Abuse. Also other organizations and institutions may be used, such as churches, hospitals, child care centers, PTA, Libraries, etc.

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